

BUILDING COMMUNITY

Queer Space History, Part 2

BY LESLIE FREEMAN-DYKESEN

In 1985, Pearl's had seemed destined to become one in a string of short-lived gay bars in and around Burlington. Wayne Beam, who grew up in Hardwick, observed the bar scene during college vacations. At Pearl's, Beam found a claustrophobic meat market, focused on young chickens. "Out of twelve guys, if I'd go to the bath-



The space that Pearl's once occupied is slated to become a Papa John's Pizzeria.

room, six would follow me in, and six would watch me go," he recalls. "It was overwhelming. It wasn't a place to connect."

When Beam returned to Burlington permanently in 1997, he discovered a dynamic queer club culture. Theatre impresario Robert Toms had bought Pearl's in 1995, and had rechristened it 135 Pearl - with a vision of genuine community and performance space for queer artists. Beam soon became an integral member of the new team; working the door, then bartending, marketing, and occasionally filling in as DJ.

135 Pearl joined a network of social spaces, influenced by alternative lifestyle communities and the queer nightlife of urban centers such as Montreal and Boston, but geared toward a smaller, geographically disparate population. This network extended from the Rainbow Cattle Company in Brattleboro to 135 Pearl.

It was supported by communities challenged by new restrictions on outdoor cruising, inspired by social change movements, and energized by national activism around HIV/AIDS and multicultural feminism. In 1990, it had included the Last Elm Cafe, a collective coffeehouse of queer and straight allies. Located deep in Burlington's Old North End, the Last Elm had provided lively art and music, a cheap bottomless

cup of coffee, and a Womyn's Open Mic. But, like many 1990s grassroots efforts, queer social spaces struggled to balance optimism about cultural visibility and tolerance, with growing apathy and leadership fatigue in the wake of hard-won successes.

By 1993, the Last Elm was no longer financially viable. Though it did not dissolve formally until 1998, core members were already burned out, unable

young Wayne Beam) had already been "phased out."

Increasingly, 135 Pearl focused on dance parties and drag shows, which drew larger crowds of youngish gay men and straight clubgoers. Some lesbians felt marginalized, or ghettoized in Womyn's Night. Meanwhile, the nightclub, unable to afford renovations, remained structurally inaccessible to dis/abled people.

135 Pearl - the "unity bar", as Robert Toms suggested - actively sought straight patrons. In 2003, Pearl's Rutland counterpart, Shooka Dooka's, opened to an 80 percent straight clientele. Granted access to civil unions, as well as increased access to adoption and child custody, now able to dance and drink among both neighbors and peers, LGBT Vermonters found more allies in mainstream culture than ever before. Yet the most vulnerable members of LGBT communities had almost nowhere to go.

Rainbow Cattle Company, Shooka Dooka's, and 135 Pearl closed in 2006. The space that Pearl's once occupied is slated to become a Papa John's Pizzeria.

Some LGBT Vermonters view assimilation as an opportunity to be truly out, not among a protected circle of other queers, but in every aspect of their lives. They consider 135 Pearl's closing to be an opportunity to bring traditionally queer concepts of freedom and self-expression into the mainstream, and to seek out new communities that share their individual values, regardless of gender or sexual orientation.

Wayne Beam, who now works at Higher Ground, points to 1/2 Lounge, The Second Floor, and other Burlington area clubs. According to Beam, these clubs have successfully borrowed from the queer club scene, hosting theme nights and hiring former 135 Pearl's employees, who have helped to create an atmosphere of acceptance and safety.

"We've reached a point where people in Burlington understand that queer members of the community have a lot more to offer than being queer," Beam says. ▼



Leslie Freeman-Dykesen is a dis/abled, queer femme mama of two, community activist, and writer. She and her family live in Winooski. Leslie can be reached at efemmera@yahoo.com.



See Subaru.
Burlington Subaru

333 Shelburne Road, Burlington, VT 05401

Terry Light

Sales & Leasing Consultant
terry@burlingtoncars.com

1.800.833.5945
802.660.8099 x107
999.7351



New Year's Eve Party 2007!

Sunday, December 31, St. John's Club in Burlington
7pm Cocktail • 8pm Dinner
Dancing into the wee hours of 2007!

- Hors d'oeuvres
- A Full Dinner with
Roast Beef and
Vegetarian Lasagna
- Champagne Toast
- Cash Bar

Before 12/15:

\$30 - for members

\$35 - for non-members

After 12/15:

\$45 - for everyone

Vermont Gay Social Alternatives

the Vermont queer community since 1980

For tickets:

www.vgsa.com/newyeartickets.htm



ERIC BERTA, MA, LLC
CLINICAL MENTAL HEALTH COUNSELOR

ANXIETY, DEPRESSION, COUPLES,
GAY/TRANS ISSUES, HIV/AIDS

1233 SHELburne RD., So. BURLINGTON, VT
802-324-5253 / WWW.ERICBERTA.COM

Thank you to all who nurtured and developed the paper over the years. OITM helped establish a healthy, vibrant LGBT community in Vermont that has led the nation in emerging social issues. The paper has been the through line to all our community has accomplished. Its presence will be sorely missed.

Gay & Lesbian
FUND OF VERMONT

--the Board of Directors of the Gay & Lesbian Fund of VT